



Bangladesh

Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) is a Muslim-majority South Asian nation bordering India and Burma on the Bay of Bengal. It is the world's eighth most populous country, with approximately 164 million people living in a land area about the size of Iowa. It is a relatively poor nation suffering from high levels of corruption. Its democratic system has faced an array of serious challenges, including political violence, weak governance, poverty, demographic and environmental strains, and Islamist militancy. The United States and Bangladesh have partnered on a wide range of issues and worked together to promote shared interests in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region.

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy that conducts regular elections, though there are increasing concerns about its trajectory. Some observers suggest it is backsliding toward a one party state and a hybrid regime that includes elements of authoritarianism and democracy. The ruling Awami League (AL) of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina increasingly dominates national politics. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has been the main opposition party. When in opposition, both parties have at times used demonstrations, labor strikes, and transport blockades, as well as the ballot box to regain control of government. Prime Minister Hasina, who has held office since 2009, won her third consecutive term in December 2018. Former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia of the BNP was convicted of graft and embezzlement in 2018 and imprisoned. She was released in March 2020 due to poor health. The next parliamentary elections are due in 2023.

The Economist Intelligence Unit projects Bangladesh's economy will grow by 7.2% in 2021/2022 and 5.7% in 2022/2023. Readymade garments reportedly accounted for over 80% of Bangladesh's exports in 2021. Export growth is expected to decelerate due to slowing consumer spending in Europe and the United States. According to the World Bank, agriculture's share of total employment in Bangladesh declined steadily over the past decade, but it remains the country's largest employment sector; agriculture accounted for 38% of total employment in 2020. The World Bank reported remittances to Bangladesh of \$21.75 billion in 2020.

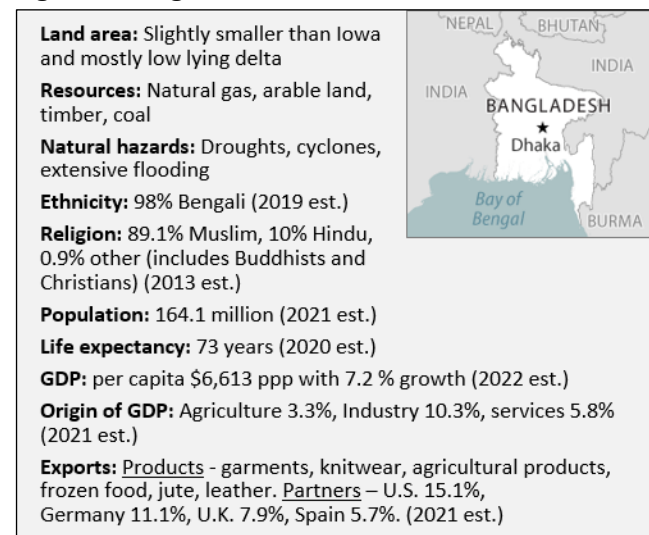
Relations with the United States

The United States has long-standing relations with Bangladesh, and recent U.S. Administrations, along with many Members of Congress, have focused on issues relating to Rohingya refugees from Burma, economic development, humanitarian concerns, labor rights, human rights, good governance, and counterterrorism. The United States is among Bangladesh's largest export markets and is a key investor in Bangladesh. Many Members of Congress contend that supporting democracy, rule of law, and human

rights in the Indo-Pacific region, including in Bangladesh, is critical to advancing U.S. values and interests.

The United States and Bangladesh hold annual bilateral Partnership Dialogues and Security Dialogues and have developed a cooperative security relationship to meet shared concerns, including violent extremism and regional security. The United States also recognizes Bangladesh's role as one of the world's largest contributors of troops to U.N. peacekeeping operations. In March 2022, Bangladesh abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution reprimanding Russia for invading Ukraine.

Figure 1. Bangladesh in Brief



Sources: Economist Intelligence Unit, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, State Department, World Atlas.

Rohingya

The predominantly Muslim Rohingya have faced persecution in Buddhist-majority Burma for years, where the current government views the Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. In September 2022, the Department of State announced \$170 million in additional humanitarian assistance for Rohingya people displaced by conflict in Burma, including in host communities in Bangladesh. This brings total U.S. assistance for the Rohingya since August 2017 to almost \$1.9 billion. Approximately 1 million ethnic Rohingya facing persecution in Burma have fled to Bangladesh, putting immense pressure on local communities and testing the Dhaka government's ability to provide adequate security, food, and sanitation. Bangladesh has criticized Burma for failure to take meaningful steps to repatriate the Rohingya. Bangladesh began relocating Rohingya from existing camps in Bangladesh to Bhashan Char, a low-lying remote island in the Bay of Bengal, in December 2020. Bangladesh reportedly plans to relocate 100,000 Rohingya to the area

despite warnings that the isolated island is vulnerable to sea level rise and storm surges.

Human Rights and Religious Freedom

Many analysts and policymakers contend that human rights and religious freedom are under threat in Bangladesh. In the *2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh*, the Department of State highlighted a number of concerns, including “unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; forced disappearance; torture or cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government or its agents.” There were also reports of “crossfire” killings, a euphemism for extrajudicial killings, in 2021. Security forces are rarely held accountable for such deaths. The constitution recognizes Islam as the state religion, but Bangladesh also officially upholds principles of secularism. Despite government espousal of tolerance, religious minorities face discrimination and violence. The *2021 State Department Report on International Religious Freedom* noted widespread anti-Hindu violence in Bangladesh in 2021.

Democracy

Observers had long viewed Bangladesh as a democratic nation. However, many analysts now argue that Bangladesh is moving toward, or has already become, a one-party state where the ruling party faces no formidable opposition. The *2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices* described the 2018 election, in which Sheikh Hasina won her most recent five-year term, was “not considered free and fair by observers.” Freedom House has stated “The ruling Awami League has consolidated political power through sustained harassment of the opposition and those perceived to be allied with it, as well as of critical media and voices in civil society. Corruption is endemic ... security forces carry out a range of human rights abuses with near impunity.” According to Human Rights Watch, authorities have jailed members of the opposition, violated freedom of speech, and suppressed critics of the ruling Awami League. Transparency International, which measures levels of national corruption, ranked Bangladesh 147th out of 180 countries in 2021, and Bangladesh dropped to 162nd in the World Press Freedom Index in 2022. Freedom House designates Bangladesh as “partly free” in its 2022 report.

Demographic and Environmental Concerns

Bangladesh is one of the world’s most densely populated countries, and many analysts believe that growing demographic pressures and environmental problems—including those linked to climate change—may result in thousands, perhaps millions, of people being displaced in coming years. According to one report, as many as one in seven Bangladeshis may be displaced by climate change. While World Bank data show that Bangladesh’s population growth rate has fallen from an annual rate of 3.2% in 1967, its populations continues to grow. According to some projections, Bangladesh’s population will peak at 193 million in 2053. If that happens, observers suggest many of these people may move to already overcrowded cities or to neighboring countries, such as India, leading to further strains on social services and, perhaps, regional instability.

Islamist Extremism

In general, the U.S. government views Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Islamic world, but the emergence of some Islamist militancy in the country has been a cause of concern for the United States, as it is for Bangladesh’s government. The U.S. and Bangladesh governments see a common interest in working to counter Islamist extremists and their ideology. Both the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent have been active in Bangladesh. A 2016 terrorist attack killed over 20 people at Dhaka’s Holey Artisan Bakery. The bakery was popular with expatriates, and several foreigners were killed, including nine Italians, seven Japanese, one American, and one Indian. Other militant groups, such as Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh, and Ansarullah Bangla Team, also have been active in the country. The Bangladesh authorities have been largely effective in thwarting the activities of IS in Bangladesh since the 2016 attack.

External Relations

The Bay of Bengal region is a focus of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which emphasizes infrastructure and energy projects, trade, transit, and other linkages throughout the region. China also has become Bangladesh’s primary supplier of military equipment, including two submarines, maritime patrol vessels, tanks, and fighter jets. By one estimate, China supplied approximately 74% of Bangladesh’s weapons between 2010 and 2019. Bangladesh-China ties expanded significantly following President Xi Jinping’s 2016 visit to Dhaka. During the visit, President Xi and Prime Minister Hasina agreed to upgrade the bilateral relationship to a “strategic partnership of cooperation.” Prime Minister Hasina traveled to China in 2019 to further strengthen bilateral cooperation.

Some in India view Bangladesh’s ties with China with concern, and consider Chinese “encroachment” in India’s neighborhood as a challenge to India’s interests. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described Bangladesh as a significant pillar of India’s “Neighborhood First” policy during a 2020 virtual summit with Hasina. In 2020, Bangladesh halted development of what would have been its first deep-sea port at Sonadia after India opposed China’s involvement. China had reportedly agreed to build and provide loans for the port. Bangladesh and India continue to build close relations, and Prime Ministers Hasina and Modi signed several Memorandums of Understanding in New Delhi in September 2022.

Bangladesh and Japan also have been developing closer relations, with Japanese financing of infrastructure projects in Bangladesh. In August 2022, the Japan International Cooperation Agency signed an investment agreement with Bangladesh SEZ Ltd. to establish a Special Economic Zone Development Project. Japan is assisting with the construction of a deep-water port at Matabari. Some see developing ties with Japan as reflecting Bangladesh’s desire to balance its relations with external partners.

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